

Chicago Sun Times, June 14, 2006

Is Congress finally listening? For years now, ordinary Americans have voiced their discontent with policymaking in Washington. They've been especially dismayed with politicians' spendthrift ways regarding all matters, great and small.

The statistics are sobering: A 33 percent increase in overall federal spending on President Bush's watch. Billions squandered on wasteful farm subsidies. Hundreds of millions more proposed to relocate an operating railroad and build a "bridge to nowhere" to link the Alaskan mainland with an island of 50 people.

Conservatives have repeatedly raised the alarm. But maybe the need for repetition isn't surprising: Anyone in business knows you don't sell a product by mentioning it only once. You must keep reminding people how important it is and explaining why they should value your product instead of your competition's.

Public policy is the same way. Conservatives have the right message, and we've spent years repeating it, citing specific numbers and getting the public behind us. Now, lawmakers may be taking notice.

On June 8, the Senate finally passed a supplemental spending bill to pay for the war in Iraq and Hurricane Katrina cleanup. At one point during negotiations, the measure was expected to cost more than \$105 billion, but in the bill they passed, senators agreed to hold the line at \$94.5 billion.

All told, they trimmed about \$14 billion in pork-barrel projects, including \$4 billion for "farm disaster aid." The definition of a "disaster" is clearly getting looser, since the Department of Agriculture declared nearly 80 percent of all U.S. counties "disaster areas" last year.

In another minor victory, on June 6 the Appropriations Committee of the House of

Representatives passed a spending bill that could ensure the bridge to nowhere never gets built. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) added an amendment that would ban the spending of federal money to design or build the bridge, or even to reimburse the state for the project. "My amendment sends a strong signal to the American people that the time for this expensive style of federal spending has passed," Kirk said.

At the same time, lawmakers finally showed they won't be railroaded anymore by Amtrak.

In the same spending bill that contains Kirk's amendment, the House committee provided \$900 million for Amtrak, the amount President Bush wanted. That's a lot of money to spend on a dysfunctional organization that struggles to make the trains run on time. But it's far less than the \$1.6 billion the railroad had requested.

It's past time for Congress to put Amtrak on a strict budget. The railroad already loses money every time a passenger steps on a train. It's only logical that lawmakers force Amtrak management to reduce operating costs and improve the quality of service -- critical goals that will be achieved only when the federal government stops propping up Amtrak by bailing it out with taxpayer dollars.

Lawmakers also stood up to the powerful air traffic controllers' union. The controllers already average \$173,000 a year in pay and benefits, but their union wanted lawmakers to increase that. By a narrow margin, the House voted to allow the FAA to reduce salaries for new hires by 28 percent. Now, lawmakers should go further and look at privatizing the controllers, a move that would save money and improve service in the long run.

There's plenty left to do. In too many ways, the federal government is like a car speeding toward a fiscal brick wall. The crash is years off, but it's inevitable unless we steer the car in a different direction.

Lawmakers have recently started to do just that. It's too early to see if these steps toward fiscal sanity become a trend (especially after election-year pressures abate) but the signs are encouraging. Those who have taken these baby steps toward responsible stewardship should be congratulated -- but also reminded that they're still at the beginning of a long journey.